



# NEWSLETTER

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## **Obituary**

### ***Dick Grove, Geographer***

Alfred Thomas Grove (always known as 'Dick') was a geographer whose research on climate change in Africa helped shape contemporary debates about climate, people and environmental change. He was born in Evesham, Worcestershire, on 8th April 1924. He died at home in Cambridge in July 2023, aged 99.

Dick was educated at Prince Henry's Grammar School in Evesham, and he entered St Catharine's College, Cambridge, in 1941, to read Geography. He was called up into the Royal Air Force in 1942, serving as a pilot, primarily in Air Training Command in Canada. Later in life, he would tell of flying a de Havilland Mosquito below sea level in the Bay of Fundy, a feat only possible because of the vast tidal range. After the war, Dick returned to Cambridge, graduating with a First in Geography in 1947.

For a year, Dick worked for the Colonial Office in Nigeria studying soil erosion and gullying. In 1949, he was offered a permanent position in Nigeria, but chose

to return to the University of Cambridge as a Demonstrator in the Department of Geography. He was appointed as a Lecturer in 1954, and remained in Cambridge until retirement. He became a Fellow of Downing College in 1963, where he was the first Director of Studies in Geography, and served as Senior Tutor and Vice Master. From 1980 to 1986, he directed the university's Centre for African Studies.

For generations of students studying Africa, Dick is probably best known for his text book *Africa South of the Sahara*. This was published by Oxford University Press in 1967, with new editions in 1970 and 1978, as *Africa*, and completely revised in 1989 as *The Changing Geography of Africa*. The book was a meticulous synthesis: concisely written, informative and lightly sceptical.

However Dick Grove's most significant contribution to African studies was his work on long-term climate change and the complex interplay of environment and society. As black-and-white vertical air photographs of Africa became available after the Second World War, he began to use them to establish the scale of climate change on African desert margins. In the 1950s, he mapped the fossil dune systems hidden beneath the rolling pastures and fields of Northern Nigeria, publishing a paper entitled 'The ancient the erg of Hausaland and similar formations on the south side of the Sahara' in the *Geographical Journal*. A year later, he followed this with 'A note on the former extent of lake Chad'. He had a way with simple but memorable titles.

Dick travelled widely, often in expeditionary style. In the summer of 1958 he took part in an expedition to the Tibesti Massif in the central Sahara, driving overland from Tripoli in British army trucks. Between October 1969 and January 1970, he joined the 'British Trans-African Hovercraft Expedition', progressing up the River Senegal and down the Niger, turning up the Benue to Lake Chad. However, most of Dick's fieldwork, carried out with his many Ph.D students in the Sahel, the Kalahari and the Ethiopian Rift, was less grandiose, although it was often eventful.

The research done by Dick and his students helped demolish the established but simplistic idea that the African tropics were wet during northern hemisphere glaciations, and dry during interglacial periods. By mapping ancient sand seas around the Sahara and the Kalahari, they showed that at the height of the last glaciation (20,000 to 12,500 years ago) there were active dune systems 500km closer the equator than in the twentieth century. Areas of dryland that are farmed today were then covered in active sand dunes. Similarly, surveys the fossil shorelines of two huge ancient 'mega lakes' in Africa (Chad and Mkgadikgadi), and lakes of the East African Rift Valley in Ethiopia, showed that many of today's drylands were wet in the early Holocene from 10,000 to 5,000 years before the present.

In the early 1970s, Dick's patient studies of Quaternary climatic change found a new and important audience among policy-makers concerned about 'desertification' in Africa. His work challenged simplistic Malthusian arguments about 'bio-geo-physical feedback', and land use practices causing 'desert spreading'. His 1972 paper in the Nigerian journal *Savanna* (with the almost whimsical title 'A note on the remarkably low rainfall of the Sudan zone in 1913') pointed out that the intense drought had cruel predecessors, even if the official mind had forgotten them.

In retirement, from the late 1980s, Dick Grove took on a new challenge, exploring the environmental history of the Mediterranean and Southern Europe, working in Crete and then more broadly. His 2001 book with Oliver Rackham, *The Nature of Mediterranean Europe: An Ecological History* reviewed the complex relations between people and environment in the Mediterranean from classical times to the present.

Dick married Jean Mary Clark (1927-2001), a glaciologist and a Fellow of Girton College, in 1954. They had six children: Richard, Jane, Lucy, Bill, Alison and Jonathan. All survive him except for Richard, a pioneering environmental historian, who died in 2020. In 2009 Dick married Ann Round, who survives him.

Dick Grove worked widely in Africa, and was a passionate believer in the need for fieldwork to understand both past and the present. He was a somewhat shy lecturer, but a supportive, encouraging and not overly prescriptive supervisor. His sometimes slightly vague manner cloaked a sharply observant mind, and his gently made suggestions (on paper or in person) were often significant. He was a keen observer of academic life, often seeming gently amused at what was going on around him. He had a profound influence both on research and on the people he worked with and taught.

**Professor Emeritus Bill Adams, University of Cambridge**